

10 Rules Of Writing (2007)

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Contents

1. NEVER OPEN A BOOK WITH WEATHER

2. AVOID PROLOGUES

3. NEVER USE A VERB OTHER THAN SAID TO CARRY DIALOGUE

4. NEVER USE AN ADVERB TO MODIFY THE VERB SAID..

5. KEEP YOUR EXCLAMATION POINTS UNDER CONTROL

6. NEVER USE THE WORDS SUDDENLY OR ALL HELL BROKE LOOSE

7. USE REGIONAL DIALECT, PATOIS, SPARINGLY

8. AVOID DETAILED DESCRIPTIONS OF CHARACTERS

9. DON'T GO INTO GREAT DETAIL DESCRIBING PLACES AND THINGS

10. TRY TO LEAVE OUT THE PART THAT READERS TEND TO SKIP

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NEVER OPEN A BOOK WITH WEATHER

If it's only to create atmosphere, and not a character's reaction to the weather, you don't want to go on too long. The reader is apt to leaf ahead looking for people. There are exceptions. If you happen to be Barry Lopez, who has more ways than an Eskimo to describe ice and snow in his book *Arctic Dreams*, you can do all the weather reporting you want.

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AVOID PROLOGUES

They can be annoying, especially a prologue following an introduction that comes after a foreword.

But these are ordinarily found in nonfiction. A prologue in a novel is backstory, and you can drop it in anywhere you want.

There is a prologue in John Steinbeck's *Sweet*

Thursday, but it's okay because a character in the book makes the point of what my rules are all about. He says: I like a lot of talk in a book and I don't like to have nobody tell me what the guy that's talking looks like. I want to figure out what he looks like from the way he talks . . . figure out what the guy's thinking from what he says. I like some description but not too much of that.

The Steinbeck character goes on to say, Sometimes I want a book to break loose with a bunch of hooptedoodle. . . . Spin up some pretty words maybe or sing a little song with language. That's nice. But I wish it was set aside so I don't have to read it. I don't want hooptedoodle to get mixed up with the story.

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NEVER USE A VERB OTHER THAN SAID TO CARRY DIALOGUE

The line of dialogue belongs to the character; the verb is the writer sticking his nose in. But said is far less intrusive than grumbled, gasped, cautioned, lied. I once noticed Mary McCarthy ending a line of dialogue with she asseverated, and had to stop reading and go to the dictionary.

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NEVER USE AN ADVERB TO MODIFY THE VERB SAID . . .

. . . he admonished gravely. To use an adverb this

way (or almost any way) is a mortal sin. The writer is now exposing himself in earnest, using a word that distracts and can interrupt the rhythm of the exchange. I have a character in one of my books tell how she used to write historical romances full of rape and adverbs.

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KEEP YOUR EXCLAMATION POINTS UNDER CONTROL

You are allowed no more than two or three per 100,000 words of prose. If you have the knack of playing with exclamers the way Tom Wolfe does, you can throw them in by the handful.

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NEVER USE THE WORDS SUDDENLY OR ALL HELL BROKE LOOSE

This rule doesn't require an explanation. I have noticed that writers who use suddenly tend to exercise less control in the application of exclamation points.

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USE REGIONAL DIALECT, PATOIS, SPARINGLY

Once you start spelling words in dialogue phonetically and loading the page with apostrophes, you won't be able to stop. Notice the way Annie

Proulx captures the flavor of Wyoming voices in her book of short stories *Close Range*.

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AVOID DETAILED DESCRIPTIONS OF CHARACTERS

Which Steinbeck covered. In Ernest Hemingway's *Hills Like White Elephants*, what do the American and the girl with him look like? She had taken off her hat and put it on the table. That's the only reference to a physical description in the story, and yet we see the couple and know them by their tones of voice, with not one adverb in sight.

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DO NOT GO INTO GREAT DETAIL DESCRIBING PLACES AND THINGS

Unless you're Margaret Atwood and can paint scenes with language or write landscapes in the style of Jim Harrison. But even if you're good at it, you don't want descriptions that bring the action, the flow of the story, to a standstill.

And finally:

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TRY TO LEAVE OUT THE PART THAT READERS TEND TO SKIP

A rule that came to mind in 1983, at lunch with Book-of-the-Month Club editors. Think of what you skip reading a novel: thick paragraphs of prose you can see have too many words in them.

What the writer is doing, he's writing, perpetrating hootedoodle, perhaps taking another shot at the weather, or has gone into the character's head, and the reader either knows what the guy's thinking or doesn't care. I'll bet you don't skip dialogue.

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My most important rule is one that sums up the ten.

If it sounds like writing, I rewrite it.

Or, if proper usage gets in the way, it may have to go.

I can't allow what we learned in English composition to disrupt the sound and rhythm of the narrative.

It's my attempt to remain invisible, not distract the reader from the story with obvious writing.

(Joseph Conrad said something about words getting in the way of what you want to say.) If I write in scenes and always from the point of view of a particular character the one whose view best brings the scene to life I'm able to concentrate on the voices of the characters telling you who they are and how they feel about what they see and what's going on, and I'm nowhere in sight.

What Steinbeck did in Sweet Thursday was title his chapters as an indication, though obscure, of what they cover. Whom the Gods Love They Drive Nuts is one, Lousy Wednesday another. The third chapter is titled Hooptedoodle 1 and the thirty-eighth chapter Hooptedoodle 2 as warnings to the reader, as if Steinbeck is saying: Here's where you'll see me taking flights of fancy with my writing, and it won't get in the way of the story. Skip them if you want.

Sweet Thursday came out in 1954, when I was just beginning to be published, and I've never forgotten that prologue.

Did I read the hooptedoodle chapters?

Every word.